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ABSTRACT

The downward trend in educational quality, as evidenced by sinking Scholastic Aptitude Test scores and other evaluatory measures, is examined. Both secondary school teachers and university faculty are held acccuntable for lowering academic standards, and much critical attention is paid to the precipitant implementation of innovative educational programs and curricula. Trends toward lenient attitudes concerning student discipline are censured. Overuse of educational media, objective testing technique, and student-centered program design are also topics of examination. (LH)

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TEACHING AND ACADEMIC STANDARDS TODAY

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TEACHING AND ACADEMIC STANDARDS TODAY

While there are some tentative signs today that the quality of teaching and the level of academic standards in the public schools and institutions of higher education will improve somewhat in the future, the most recent (1978-1979) National Scholastic Aptitude test scores available have again fallen to record lows. Declines from the previous year's levels, however, were rather small--from 429 to 427 for the verbal section and from 468 to 467 for the mathematical--out of a possible 800.[1] Still more discouraging, however, is that the average national score for the Test of Standard Written English has declined each year since it was introduced in 1975, at which time the average level for women was 44.3 and for men 42.2, out of a possible 60. In 1979 the score for women declined to 43.2, and to 41.8 for men.[2]

The fact that the above verbal-mathematical SAT declines were smaller than they had been for most of the yearly periods since 1964 is heartening. Yet many people had hoped that the 1978-1979 period would have arrested the decline absolutely, and might even have shown a slight improvement. It is probably reasonable to assume that while the "back to the basics" and simliar movements during the past year or so have had a salutary influence on educational standards, an improved national academic achievement record

will take still more time to realize. After two decades and more of permissive, often unstructured, and radically innovative teaching formats, it is not easy to reverse academic achievement levels quickly. Yet there is some hope for improvement in the future.

During the 1978-1979 Florida academic year, where literacy tests have been mandated in the public schools, test scores have improved somewhat; truancy and disruptive conduct have declined slightly during this same period. There now appears to be a new effort among public officials to hold public schools and colleges accountable, to some degree at least, for the money that has been spent on them. In any event, this fact is repeatedly being reported in the press. On a national level the impact of various testing programs is beginning to be felt in a positive manner; the so-called "social promotion" of academically unqualified students is being made somewhat more difficult in some institutions.[3]

Numerous reasons exist for today's depressed state of the nation's public schools and colleges: the excessive use of television in the home, one-parent homes, the drug problem--the list is long indeed. Yet the single most important reason for the decline in student academic achievement levels in recent years can be blamed on the overuse of many radically innovative and unproven teaching methodologies, along with a significantly less demanding curriculum. Questionable educational philosophies which emphasize non-punitive

grading and attendance, academic grade inflation, the excessive use of technology in the classroom, too much objective testing and not enough subjective or written tests--the list is endless--are the real culprits.

A public-school teacher in California for 21 years, Charles M. Frye, points out that if a business or government agency had been experiencing a fifteen year decline (as has education's student achievement test scores), someone surely would have subjected the management to intense scrutiny, at least. Yet various studies of the school problem have been carefully avoided such as: who runs the schools and many of the colleges?[4] He blames educational leaders for the present unhappy situation; those who simply "flail their arms and point their fingers in self-defense at the home, the television sets and the shattered marriages." Frye points a finger at the school Establishment, consisting of four major interlocking groups:

> . . . the many and various graduate schools of education which train and certify teachers, administrators and the other bureaucrats; the Federal education complex; the various state departments of education; and the local school administration corps.[5]

Frye argues that these groups are largely interchangeable because they all have taken many graduate education courses which are almost totally lacking in content. From 1964 to 1977, 77,000 candidates took the Graduate Record Examinations. Of these, 4,365 were applying to graduate schools of education. Eighty-one percent of these were below average in the verbal section and 84 percent below

average in the quantitative. Fewer than 100 compiled scores considered distinguished.[6]

The above figures do not speak well for the professional educators, especially for those administering the public schools. Yet this is the very period when "innovation" and "change" in instruction and in the curriculum were at their peak in the nation's public schools and colleges. Such change had to be, according to myriad supporters who had claimed that education had too long suffered from a "horse and buggy" image, implemented on a massive scale. Computerized, all-objective classroom testing took the place of long-standing subjective or written formats. These critics maintained that instructors no longer had time to grade students' written test papers. Besides, it was argued, all-objective classroom tests could offer better samples of student achievement levels.

The results that have occurred from these changes have not been happy ones. Functional illiteracy and drastically lower academic achievement levels of the past fifteen years and more can, to a substantial degree, be blamed on this type of instructional change. The argument that such innovation was necessary if for no other reason than that class enrollments were increasing during this period is specious. Instructors could have offered combination-type, or objective-subjective tests, in their larger classes; this would have required less paper grading time than the earlier all-

subjective test formats. Besides, in recent years class enrollments have been declining. Thus, the ubiquitous all-objective test is seldom necessary--"combination type" tests are far more representative of real student abilities and skills than one-sided, multiple-choice, true-false formats. Also, the former give students experience in writing and in expression that are lacking in the former; they are more comprehensive.

Paul Copperman speaks out strongly for greater control over public school students. He maintains that school laws must be strengthened so that they will more effectively deal with recalcitrant and disruptive students. He argues that the misapplication of the democratic ideal to parenting and teaching is the single most destructive force in the education of America's youth.[7] Copperman says:

> It is current educational policy to give children a great deal of choice over what, how, and even whether they study. In every school in the country students determine how much science, math, history and composition they will take. The basis for these choices is the paradigm of democracy applied to education: the consent of the governed becomes the consent of the children.[8]

If further proof were needed that school laws must be changed before the public school system can hope to improve substantially, television programs such as the Columbia Broadcasting Company's popular "Sixty Minutes" of Mike Wallace et al. graphically illustrates to what degree student violence and lack of discipline in the schools is ubiquitous. The March 1979 program, repeated in September, 1979 illustrated

vividly the extent to which public school teachers are abused, beaten, and in some instances even killed by disruptive students--and on a national level. For example, during the year 1978 over 60,000 incidents of teacher injuries by students were reported. Undoubtedly the true number, including unreported incidents, would magnify this number significantly.[9]

For political reasons lawmakers at all levels are reluctant to really enforce school laws and their penalties as these affect students. Changes must be made if substantial improvement in student behavior and in academic achievement are to be realized. Further arguments that such newly drafted laws might interfere with student freedoms, as indicated in the United States Constitution's Bill of Rights, are unconvincing. As Copperman points out, democracy assumes a capacity for choice based on independence and responsibility, which is developed only as an individual experiences the consequences of his life choices. The youthful period of life is one in which this kind of responsibility and independence does not normally exist.[10]

As noted above, the educational establishment for over fifteen years had argued that only by radical change in previous teaching methodologies would classroom instruction accommodate conditions of the late twentieth century. Change, of course, has always occurred throughout human history, sometimes for the better and sometimes otherwise. Yet radical, unproven and often mindless change of educational

philosophy in both curriculum and instruction has not and will not bring about the panaceas in education that have so frequently been promised by radical innovators. Too often innovation in the teaching process becomes a matter of magic in the process--it is instant imitation of what some other school or college has done. Often the change may be no better, or even less useful, than the plan that was replaced.[11]

Another myth concerns the frequent overuse of educational technology (programmed instruction, educational television, video recording, slides, films and other media)--that it will produce substantially more learning than otherwise. This is not necessarily true. Films, for example, can at times enhance the instructional presentation of the teacher's more traditional verbal-blackboard format. But film and other audio-visual media are not substitutes for a well-organized, serious instructor--unless, perhaps, the film actually presents such an instructor on that medium. Even so, a competent teacher usually is more persuasive and flexible than one on film or in another audio-visual format. For example, if a film presents travel scenes, or even relives pictorially some of Napoleon's exploits, it is not a substitute for a well-organized and experienced instructor, whose words may be actively recorded in the notebooks of students. Audio-visual media if not overused can enhance learning. it cannot substitute for a teacher's efforts, as it so often attempts to do.

Audio-visual media sometimes lull students into believing that they are learning much substantive material when in reality only small amounts of it are passing before their eyes. Careful study of books and other reading materials, along with alert listening to well-organized instructors from whom note-taking is possible, will always be central to the learning process. Relaxed watching of audio-visual presentations cannot accomplish the same ends as an instructor in front of a class. The former can enhance and supplement--but that is all. If academic achievement could be accomplished by the relaxed observation of films or other media exclusively, academic work would be easy indeed. Unfortunately, this format alone is not a substitute for a teacher.

Too often the value of reform in teaching is based on sheer guesswork simply because its supporters are biased in their support for it; honest and exhaustive evaluation is lacking. This is the story of myriad innovations in teaching since the early 1960's, many of which promising so much and giving so little to the teaching process. Simply because certain new methodologies appeared to work in some institutions does not mean that they would be useful on a national scale--with different types of instructors, students and educational philosophies. The implementation of "open" classrooms and non-punitive grading systems, along with greater emphasis on affective rather than substantive learning

are examples of change that has so often been less than useful. Critics have long intoned against "teacher centered" instruction. They have insisted that students in the public schools be treated as "peers" of their instructors rather than as people of temporarily lesser status. They opt for a "short paper" prepared out of class to a formal written classroom test. They denigrate the learning of substantive material in favor of "affective" and "creative" learning. These and innumerable other "informal" methodologies are typical of many new and innovative teaching techniques--including the use of student evaluations of instructors. If properly employed, such evaluations may be of some use; too often, however, they become mere popularity contests rather than true assessments of teaching.

For almost two decades many of the above innovations have become almost ubiquitous. Today all types of "horror stories" based on some of these teaching formats are being heard. As already noted, change is an important factor in all human experience, but it must be truly proven and gradual to be beneficial. Such type of beneficial change may be occurring at Miami-Dade Community College in Florida. After years of employing an unsuccessful "no student suspension policy for academic reasons," this institution apparently decided to suspend 2,512 low-ranking students after the end of the 1978 Spring term. This new policy may still be too moderate and non-threatening. Successful completion of a special three-

credit summer term guidance course will now ordinarily return students to good standing.[12] Miami-Dade Community College officials, in announcing their new suspension policy have noted:

> While the numbers are small, there are certain students who appear to be more interested in receiving federal financial aid than in achieving successful results at college. There are national concerns about this problem as well. Miami-Dade's new standards, which apply to all students, will alleviate any abuse in terms of outside support that is provided to students to obtain an education.[13]

The above innovation should be useful, of course, but it still does not recognize an equally serious problem--that which is known as academic grade inflation. Again because of misguided educational philosophies, this procedure has likewise allowed educational standards to erode nationally.[14] This unhappy phenomenon has developed in American education in recent years for myriad reasons, including the often indiscriminate use of student evaluations of classroom teaching. While there may be some beneficial results from such evaluations, they must be used with greater discrimination and care than often is the practice. Too often, unfortunately, faculty members give students high grades so that the former in turn may be evaluated favorably by their students. Attempts for anonymity among the students are not always successful. Besides, overall high grades from

instructors often elicit similar results from student evaluations of their mentors.[15]

Failure to discipline non-achieving students along with academic grade inflation have wrecked havoc on academic standards in many educational institutions. Whether real change for the better is noticeable yet is difficult to ascertain. A few institutions, it appears, are beginning to support more stringent academic standards. Public dissatisfaction with the low level of students' basic skills competencies have finally resulted in the adoption of the Florida secondary school functional literacy test. Unfortunately, a misguided judge has already decided that these tests will have no affect in preventing students from receiving high school diplomas until the year 1983. This is far too long to have to wait; academic standards can only be affected adversely by such a judicial decision. An appeal to a higher court has yet to be heard.

Few people would disagree that American students, including the disadvantaged and the underprepared, should be aided by the government when appropriate to help them to obtain a post-secondary school education. Yet in recent years it has been clearly indicated that many students have frequently abused the very educational system which has tried to do so much to help them. Even John Rouche, long an advocate for aiding underprepared and disadvantaged students, now

appears to have substantially altered his earlier position on this issue. Says Rouche:

> Today practically every institution of higher education is up to its elbows with thousands of students who don't read, write, speak, listen, study or figure well enough to be in college. Over seventy percent of the four year colleges and universities admit to an open-door admissions and recruitment policy. Even highly selective institutions--Stanford, Ohio State, University of California (Berkeley) and the University of Texas at Austin--are now finding that thousands of their highly recruited academically gifted students are not prepared for regular freshman courses. Inability of the students to read can be blamed on grade inflation and poor teaching in secondary schools.[16]

Rouche maintains that community college students especially, and students in general, should not be allowed to take courses for which they are unprepared. He urges administrators of educational institutions to make sure that such students receive remediation before they are allowed to enter standard courses. Yet Rouche fails to realize that college level remedial courses often cannot achieve levels of competency for students who in the past were either unwilling or unable to succeed. In recent years, unfortunately, many institutions, in order to accommodate insistent people, have allowed remedial students to receive regular academic transfer credit for remedial course work. At the college level remedial course work, according to numerous studies, is limited in its affectiveness. Almost superhuman efforts on the part of institutions have often yielded little academic improvement, sometimes because such students continue to be unwilling students.

In our efforts to help underachieving students we sometimes neglect the gifted ones. The well-known columnist James Kilpatrick claims that something is wrong when a state spends $740 per student on 220,000 underprepared and handicapped students and only $40 per student on 70,000 gifted ones. Says Kilpatrick:

> The national obsession with equality of opportunity has been vindictively satisfied in the public schools by concentrating on the disadvantaged and ignoring the gifted.[17]

Perhaps the earliest beginnings in improved academic standards can already be noticed; it is too early to say with certainty. There remain, however, too many political considerations and suspect educational philosophies in the educational establishment and elsewhere for this movement to expand. The many educational aims of the nation's largest independent educational organization, the National Educational Association (NEA), too often militate against more substantive and conservative curricula. Excessive reliance on educational technology is a prime example. Richard W. Smith, writing in Change, points out that educational television was launched with great expectations 25 years. ago. Yet today, he maintains, both closed-circuit TV in the classroom and instructional TV intended for home audiences have yet to catch on. Says Smith:

> Yet the University of Mid-America, created by the University of Nebraska, discovered that home-study students in an accounting course using only printed texts performed as well on examinations

> as those who had also watched all of the course's expensively produced TV segments.[18]

Smith goes on to say that educational television cannot succeed simply as a video version of what the average teacher does in the classroom. It does not impart information efficiently. To survive, he says, "it must play to the strength of the medium and utilize the superior teacher-performer who, by intellect and personality can, inspire students to want to learn.[19]

In conclusion, it must be recognized that drastic measures must soon be taken if the present crisis in education is to be substantially alleviated. The little progress that has already been achieved during the past year or so has been encouraged by the public media and by the people; they are demanding more substantive and basic education--not simply "minimum competency" education. Certainly the educational establishment itself, including the National Educational Association, has done little to improve this situation. The very beginnings of improvement appear to have been made recently; let us hope that truly substantial progress will be reached during the 1980's.

NOTES

1. "Verbal, Math SAT Scores Decline to All-Time Low," Chronicle of Higher Education, September 7, 1979, p. 6.

2. Ibid.

3. "School Year's Opening Bell Rings in Justifiable Hopes." The Miami Herald, August 27, 1979, p. 6-A.

4. Frye, Charles M. "Who Runs the Schools?" Newsweek, September 3, 1979, p. 13.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Copperman, Paul. The Literacy Hoax. New York: William Morrow and Company Inc., 1978, p. I.

8. Ibid., pp. 150-151.

9. Wallace, Mike, et al. "Sixty Minutes." New York: Columbia Broadcasting Company Broadcasting System Television Network, March 1, 1979; repeated September 2, 1979.

10. Copperman, p. 50.

11. Barnett, Collins W. "The Myth of Change in Higher Education." Intellect, April, 1974, pp. 424-425.

12. "New M-DCC Standards Result in Suspensions." FACC Current: Official Newsletter of the Florida Association of Community Colleges. May, 1979, p. 1.

13. Ibid., p. 8.

14. Handleman, Chester. "The Curriculum: The Public Media Versus the Professional Books and Journals." Adolescence, Winter, 1978, pp. 563-573.

15. FACC Current, p. 8.

16. Rouche, John. "Let's Get Serious About the High Risk Students," Community and Junior College Journal, September, 1978, pp. 30-31.

17. Kilpatrick, James J. "America's Schools Penalize the Gifted Child," The Miami Herald, September 1, 1979, p. 7A.

18. Smith, Richard W. "Educational Televivision Is Not Educating." Change, December-January, 1978/79 as seen in The Wilson Quarterly, Spring, 1979, p. 32.

19. Ibid.